

Competing for the floor in the American home

— Japanese students sharing host families —

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Introduction

It is a commonly held belief in language education that the most efficient way to make progress in learning a second language is to spend time living in an environment where the target language is spoken on a daily basis. As Goodwin and Nacht (1988) state, “mastery of a modern language has traditionally been perceived as the most direct educational benefit of study abroad” (p. 16). This belief has helped promote and sustain a large number of study abroad programs sponsored by universities in the United States and has also played a role in stimulating study abroad programs for Japanese learners of English. In 1999 alone, 186 thousand Japanese nationals were studying abroad and half of these were in the United States. Compiling the figures from 1985 to 2000, the fifteen-year total of Japanese nationals who spent time studying abroad comes to over 2 million (Japan Information Network, 2002). Given the large number of Japanese nationals who have sought educational opportunities abroad and the assumed benefits for English language acquisition, it is quite remarkable that there have been so few empirical studies on the Japanese English learning experience overseas.

With few exceptions (e.g., Habu, 2000), the empirical studies on study abroad from Japan document linguistic gain (e.g., Asai, 1997; Hisama, 1995; Iwakiri, 1993; Woodman, 1998; Yamamoto,

1992); perceptions of students (Archwamety, 1996; Shaw, et al., 1994; Woodman, 1998; etc.); and their intercultural adjustment and personal development (e.g., Ishino, et al., 1999; Shimada, 1995; Yashima, 1999). If there is one uniform message that can be taken from these studies, it is that there are no consistent findings.

The results of proficiency studies are far from consistent. For example, Iwakiri (1993) found that junior college students who spent five weeks in Australia made more gains on a listening test than their counterparts who stayed in Japan. In contrast, the junior college students in Yamamoto's (1992) study did not improve in their listening after four weeks at an American college. However, they performed better than the control group in Japan in reading and on a dictation test. Hisama (1995) even found inconsistencies in the same program in consecutive years in the change in listening skills of her participants. Explaining a wide range of self-reported change in learner confidence as a result of time spent abroad, Ishino et al. (1999) suggested that "the range of interactional situations students engage in and certain environmental aspects of the overseas site itself influence the degree to which self-reported change in self confidence was observed" (p. 42). While the inconsistent findings have presented researchers using pre-post test designs with the difficult task of explaining confounding results, this phenomenon is far from unique to the Japanese study abroad experience. In reviews of studies on English speakers studying abroad, both Huebner (1995) and Freed (1995) report conflicting results in proficiency gains.

In qualitative studies involving Americans overseas, possible explanations for the wide variety of results found in quantitative studies are emerging. For example, Polanyi (1995) has a powerful article in which she documents how American female learners in Russia have to master strategies and pragmatics needed to fend off the advances of sexist native speakers. Her qualitative study offers one potential explanation for Brecht, Davidson and Ginsberg's (1995) finding that "during their stay in Russia, women gain less than

men in listening and speaking skills” (pp. 55-56). Gender has also been found to be a mitigating participant characteristic in study abroad in Costa Rica (Twombly, 1995), Japan (Ogulnick, 1998; Seigal, 1995, 1996) France (Wilkinson, 1998) and Spain (Talbert & Stewart, 1999). In addition to these studies, other qualitative reports have begun to present data on the homestay experience that could help explain variation in linguistic gain resulting from time spent overseas. These studies have cited factors such as clearly unwelcoming host parents and tenant-like arrangements (Wilkinson, 1998), variation in host behavior and shared host families (Knight & Schmidt-Rinehart, 2002), and participant homework (Frank, 1997; Rivers, 1998) as variables that might be limiting participant opportunities to interact in and learn the target language. While researchers looking at the American experience abroad have begun to question and problematize assumptions and beliefs regarding study abroad, there have been very few studies of this nature on Japanese learners of English.

It is the intent of this study to present the partial findings of a larger qualitative study on Japanese learners of English in a short-term study abroad program to the United States. In this study, I look at the experience of two triads of Japanese high school students who were assigned to “share” host families during their time overseas. One of the goals of this study is to describe and highlight how living together in the American home affects opportunities to practice and learn English. While the practice of housing Japanese learners of English together during a study abroad program is rarely noted in the literature, there is good reason to believe that it is more prevalent than the scarce mention might suggest. The pairing of students is rarely reported because coordinators and researchers are more interested in showing how their programs lead to positive change in competencies.

The overall effect is that the myth of immersion, the ideology of a single language learner in a surrogate family is propagated, and

the ways in which home-stay placements affect language learning experiences is left unquestioned. To wit, in the few cases where shared hosting arrangements are brought up, they are usually framed as being facilitative to language learning. For example, during their one weekend in a host family, students from Kitakyushu University were paired together based on proficiency levels “to provide a linguistic crutch and decrease students’ anxiety about the homestay” (Drake, 1997, p. 11). The probability that lower proficiency learners paired with intermediate-level learners might have fewer opportunities to use their English was not brought up in this study. Thus, in describing the experience of students who had to share a family, it is my hope to present at least one possible factor that might help explain the considerable variation in findings reported in previous proficiency studies.

Participants

The participants in the larger study from which this report was derived were 39 (35 female and 4 male) second-year high school students in an intensive English program at a private high school in the Kansai region of Japan. In this report, I focus on the experiences of two groups of three female participants who were asked to share host families during their one-month study abroad program in the United States. The six second-year high school female participants were between the age of 16 and 17 at the time of this study. When the exchange began in the fall of 1999, the participants were rated as high-beginner to low-intermediate level speakers on an oral proficiency interview.

Host context

The participants spent three weeks living with families and attending classes in the suburbs of a large city on the East coast of the United States. Three of the participants in this study (Kana, Maiko and Sumiko) stayed with a couple aged 55-60 and attended

classes in a local public high school. Their host mother was a substitute teacher at the high school and their host father was a writer in early retirement. Both parents supplemented their income by acting as tour organizers for a local university alumni association. The other three participants (Hanako, Yuri and Sachiko) stayed with a couple in their late forties and their daughter. The host father was a local real estate developer and the host mother stayed at home. The three participants in this family attended classes at a local private high school which their host sister attended. Both families lived in affluent neighborhoods and had sufficient space in their homes to host several students as some of their children were away at college or had started families of their own. The families were hosting on a volunteer basis.

Method

The data for this study was collected using qualitative research methods including observations, interviews, taped conversation and observations recorded in participant journals. Prior to leaving Japan, the participants were trained to conduct field observations in an attempt to “investigate systematically what opportunities they [had] to interact with native speakers” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 27). During the study abroad program, three colleagues and I accompanied the participants and acted as coordinators at the four host schools. In my capacity as leader of the program, I paid visits to all four schools. I met Kana, Maiko and Sumiko on five occasions at their host school and I went to their host home on three occasions. During my second visit, I joined them and their host family for dinner. I spoke with all three of these participants informally and interviewed each of them once. In addition, I spoke regularly with the colleagues who were assigned to the two host schools in this study and received regular updates on the participants’ homestay situation. The interview with Hanako was

conducted by a colleague accompanying us on the exchange. While we were in the United States, I visited Hanako and her peers at school on two occasions. Permission to include the experiences and transcribed recordings in this study was obtained from the participants and pseudonyms are used to protect their identity.

In addition to the two cases presented in this study, I collected and examined data on seven other hosting situations in which participants were sharing a host family. In a comparison of all nine cases of participants in shared host context, I chose the data from the two cases presented here as it is the most representative of the difficulties facing learners who are placed in a host home together.

Analysis

In the discussion below, I focus first on the experience of Hanako, Yuri and Sachiko and then turn to the homestay shared by Maiko, Kana and Sumiko. Both cases help illustrate how the participants felt about being placed in the same host family with other peers. However, interaction between Maiko, Kana and Sumiko is presented in the latter part of this study as it supports the claims being made by Hanako and other participants. In my analysis, I draw on Bourdieu's (1991) framework of the economy of linguistic exchanges and self-censorship.

Lost opportunities: "One can't possibly learn!"

A case that illustrates the effect of shared families on learning opportunities is that of Hanako, Yuri and Sachiko. Yuri and Hanako were originally placed into the Maxwell family, a family that had hosted for several years running. When Sachiko's host parents suddenly could not come to pick her up at the hotel because of a family emergency, the Maxwell family offered to take Sachiko to their house for the first weekend, increasing the number of students to three. In an interview with my colleague, Hanako commented on

her first few days in the Maxwell family. Observe as Hanako first expresses one of her main objectives of the exchange and then explains how her speaking opportunities are affected by sharing a family with two other peers.

Excerpt 1

Ms. V: What are you looking forward to doing?

H: Nnnnn...To talking with Middle School students....I think it's too difficult for me because I can't...explain...explain.. *chau*...I can't speak English well and I can't quickly English...I can't understand quickly English, so very difficult, but ...it's...it's a good for me to learn English and to learn American...culture *ja nakute*... America... nnn.. *ano*... conversation... conversation My English....is it my English is bad?

Ms. V: No. No, your English is not bad. How about...How is your home-stay family? And their English and everything?

H: Nnnn...I often talk to Japanese friend, so half...50% I talk to ...ah....one day half...I don't speak to... *eto*..a lot of time to...with host family.

Ms. V: Just with Yuri and Sachiko

H: Ah, yeah.

Hanako sees one of the main purposes of the exchange as learning how to converse in American English, and yet — in her estimation — she ended up speaking Japanese at least 50% of the time for the first three days. As the interview progresses, Hanako attributes the amount of Japanese she speaks to two factors. As stated above, she realizes that having other Japanese speakers in the host family increases the amount of Japanese she uses and conversely decreases her interaction in English. Later, she also says

that her English is difficult to understand because it is “Japanese English” and as a result, she hesitates to try communicating in English. Quite possibly, the presence of her two Japanese peers has the effect of increasing the “Japaneseness” of her English. As Bourdieu (1991) notes,

. . .the competitive struggle. . .leads each agent through countless strategies of assimilation and *dissimilation* (*vis-à-vis* those who are ahead of and behind him in the social space and time) constantly to change his substantial properties (here, *pronunciation, diction, syntactic devices, etc.*), while maintaining, precisely by running the race, the disparity which underlies the race. (p. 64) (emphasis added)

Feeling that her English, as affected by the presence of her peers, is not good enough, Hanako reveals that she is even engaging a form of self-censorship (p. 77) that further restricts her opportunities to learn. She sees the experience as a lost opportunity in the making.

Later in the interview, Hanako also brings up the low ratio of native English speakers to Japanese students as a further restriction on her interaction in English. In the following exchange, which occurs twenty minutes into the interview, Hanako seizes the opportunity to express her frustration to me, the head chaperone. Asked if she would like to share anything else that has been on her mind, she first says that there are too many things to say, particularly given her view of her English speaking ability. However, when she is reminded that the interview is for me (someone who can understand Japanese), she expresses her surprise at sharing a family with two other students.

Excerpt 2

Ms. V: Do you have anything else you've been thinking about?

H: Nnnnn. ..Noth...no, I can't say everything.

Ms. V: So, now you don't have.....you can't say any... everything?

H: Nnn.

Ms. V: Too many things?

H: Yeah...nnn....to explain English... I can't.

Ms. V: Do you want to say it in Japanese? It's for Mr. Churchill. Mr. Churchill will listen, so you can say anything you want?

H: *Ah..ah..Sannin!!! Sannin no hosuto famiri bikkuri shita. Hosuto famiri no ie ni sannin ni to iu no wa bikkuri shita.*

Ms. V: Why?

H: Because.....eh.....*zenzen benkyo ni naranai*.... I think. *Datte....*

Ms. V: *SanninNihonjin wa sannin?*

H: *Nnn.*

Ms. V: *Sore gachotto dame?*

H: *Zettai akan!!! Datte, mokou no kazuko sannin!! Kochi mo sannin!*

Ms. V: *Hai.*

H: They can't speak English....We can't speak....we ..we speak Japanese...so separate...and ...*kai*....inin...dinner...or lunch..and...*yappari*...separate

Asked to elaborate why she was surprised (*bikkuri shita*) at being in a family with two other peers, Hanako becomes emphatic as she sums up the sentiment of many participants placed in families together, "*Zenzen benkyo ni naranai*" (One can't possibly learn [in this situation] !). She then forcefully asserts that there are only three native English

speakers in a host family for three Japanese teenagers. While it is not possible to convey Hanako's tone in a transcript, her use of *datte* (but. . .) and Ms. V's acquiescent "*Hai*" (yes) give some indication of the increased determination in her voice. She then drives the point home by saying that lunch and dinner conversations feel separate because the hosts and the three girls are communicating in their respective native languages.

Competing for the floor

The example above is not uncharacteristic of how the home-stay experience can be altered by adding another student, or other students, to a family. The differences are in the specifics, but the overall negative influence on language learning opportunities and the experience as a whole are the same. For example, in my consultations with Maiko, Sumiko and Kana, I learned that Kana and Maiko felt the arrangement put them in stark competition for the floor when they spent time with their host parents. According to Kana, from the very first day, Sumiko set the tone by giving her hosts her gifts without first negotiating a diplomatic way to do this with Maiko and Kana. As a result, Kana felt that she was being upstaged by Sumiko. Maiko also said that she was not getting enough opportunities to talk about herself. Kana and Maiko told me that Sumiko was trying to monopolize the conversation and this adversely affected their relations with her and the host parents. Interestingly, Sumiko also felt that she was not being afforded enough chances to speak in English with Kana and Maiko around.

To illustrate this point, it may be helpful to spend a few moments in the kitchen with Sumiko, Maiko and Kana as dinner is being prepared. Early during a visit to talk to the three participants and the hosts about the situation, I asked the three how their day had been. Observe as Maiko (M) and Kana (K) respond to my question and Sumiko (S) completes Maiko's sentence.

Excerpt 3

E: So, did you have fun shopping today?

M: Yeah

[

K: uhuh

E: Was Potter Square fun?

M: Ummm

[

K: fun ha ha ha ha

[

M: ye- yes- yesterday, your mother...*ano*...I...

[

K: I saw....I we met

[

S: I

met...we met your mother.

E: Yeah, you went to the yeah yeah

[

]

M: go to...ah went to football game with
your mother.

(Tape Recorded Data, Oct. 24th, 1999)

As we can see in this excerpt, Kana attempts to complete Maiko's sentence and Sumiko cuts in to finish the task. As I start to confirm what they say, Maiko finally gets to finish her thought. While the three girls are working together to construct a story, none of them can get beyond a complete sentence in this competitive environment. Moreover, both Kana and Sumiko would appear to be uncertain if they are speaking for themselves (*I*) or for the three girls (*we*). In another speech sample taken later in the same conversation, we can hear Sumiko interrupting Maiko. Witness as the three vie for

a place on the floor. In the excerpt below, A and B are the host father and host mother.

Excerpt 4

A: You got your ears pierced? Oh, you got another one?

M: No, no, no, no. I bought

A: [Oh yeah, another one...ah...OK.

M: And

S: [Do I have time uh...um by dinner?

B: Yes, . . .before dinner to? Where are you...what do you =

S: [Yes

B: = Want to do?

[Ah, I I want to go to um...sen...post off....post off

K: [post off-

B: Well, post office isn't open today right.

S: [Um Could um yes...air mail

K: [send letter

E: I can I can, if you have letters, I will send them.... when I go...when I drive my car, so you don't have to walk to the post office.

S: Ughh

(Tape recorded data, Oct. 24th, 1999)

Here Sumiko interrupts Maiko's discussion with the host father to ask about going to the post office. As she appears to run into some

lexical difficulty, Kana offers to help by starting to offer “post office”. As the conversation ensues, we see Kana cutting into Sumiko’s utterance again. While Kana may have been trying to be helpful, the effect is that Sumiko’s speech is fragmented. Here again, Sumiko is not afforded the opportunity to get beyond the sentence level. While the three may have been trying to help each other get their messages across, the effect was to restrict each other’s speech, thus leading to a feeling of competition for the floor. As a result, the relationship between Maiko, Sumiko and Kana was becoming strained.

Unaware of some of the dynamics between the three girls, the host father said that he was enjoying the girls’ company but that he was a bit doubtful that they were getting much out of the experience, which felt “superficial” (Field Notes, October 24, 1999). I find this comment particularly interesting because it not only supports the claims being made by the three participants regarding reduced opportunities to speak English, but also illustrates how having several Japanese students in a host family affects the way the students are viewed by their hosts. With each participant having fewer opportunities to speak, the host parents were not able to get a clear idea of each individual’s real speaking abilities. Not only were Kana, Sumiko and Maiko being perceived as having minimal communicative ability, but the hosts were also not able to get to know the participants well, thus leading to a feeling that the experience was superficial.

Here, we may draw on Bourdieu’s (1991) *economy of linguistic exchanges* to bring another level of analysis to the conversation above. Refuting a Saussurean approach to linguistics and “the interactionist perspective, which treats interaction as a closed world, forgetting what happens between two persons”, Bourdieu argues that the value of an utterance and the capacity to have one’s message heard “is not determined in linguistic terms alone” (p. 67). Rather, in the market of a given context,

The value of the utterance depends on the relation of power that is concretely established between the speakers' linguistic competencies, *understood both as their capacity for production and as their capacity for appropriation and appreciation. . .* (p. 67, emphasis added)

From Bourdieu's perspective, linguistic competency is at least partially dependent on how receptive the context is to one's words and how a given speaker negotiates such reception. In particular, Bourdieu is interested in how relations between more and less powerful agents – e.g., “between employer and employee, . . . between French speaker and Arabic speaker”, shape their interaction and he is eager to highlight the competitive disadvantages, or *competitive struggle* (p. 64), of the less powerful that are evident in and perpetuated through interaction.

It is worth noting that Bourdieu's discussion focused on the interactional *dyad* and its abstracted equivalent at the class and political level. The competition is between the historically and socially disadvantaged and those in power. What the example of Kana, Sumiko and Maiko illustrates however, is that the world is far more complex. Not only did each of the three girls have to engage in a competitive struggle with fully competent native speakers for a place in the interaction, but they simultaneously had to respond to the attempts of their compatriots, realizing all along that each time their peer was successful their opportunities were diminished. The effect was that the experience felt “superficial” to the host father and they appeared to be far less competent than their actual capacity for production in a more favorable environment. The context helped produce perceptions of their competencies that suggested they were lacking in skills that they actually had. At the same time, their peers placed into a family of their own were enjoying more opportunities to interact and learn English. Accordingly, perceptions of their ability improved accordingly throughout their stay.

Conclusion

Of the many aspects of the Japanese study abroad experience, host family placement may be one of the more significant in determining ultimate linguistic gain. Upon reflection, this may seem obvious, but it is also a component of the Japanese study abroad experience that continues to be swept under the research rug. The number of participants in studies who are paired together in specific study abroad programs is never reported and there has been no comparison of their linguistic gains with participants who have benefited from having a host family of their own. One could argue that this is because there are relatively few instances of students being paired together. However, to conclude — on the basis of so few reports and without further investigation — that the experiences of the participants in this study are an anomaly would be an unfortunate oversight. The phenomenal increase in Japanese studying abroad from 14 thousand in 1985 to 186 thousand in 1999 alone should give us some indication of the dramatic change in the demand for homestay placements. While the number of host families may have increased during the earlier part of this time frame, it is highly unlikely that the number of available host families has increased by a factor of ten in the past fifteen years. Furthermore, a careful reading of studies on the Japanese study abroad experience supports observations from informal conversations with other program directors suggesting that Japanese learners of English are commonly placed into a host home together. While the extent to which this phenomenon exists is unknown, in the program investigated in this study more than 50% of the participants shared a host family. In this light, an extensive study into the number of Japanese learners of English paired in host families on an annual basis would be a welcomed contribution to the literature on study abroad.

In this small study on the homestay experience of six

Japanese female high school students in two American homes, I have begun to describe how being placed together affects the language learning opportunities of study abroad participants. The data presented here suggests that having to “share” a host family affects not only the learners’ perceptions of themselves and their motivation to speak English, but also places them in a competitive environment that reduces their opportunities to speak English and has negative consequences for how they are perceived by their hosts. While placing pairs of Japanese students in host homes may have become widely accepted by host institutions, program coordinators and participants, it is my hope that this small report has given us all cause to reconsider this practice in study abroad programs.

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